In Defence of a Magic Circle: The Social and Mental Boundaries of Play

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the history of the concept of the magic circle, its criticism and the numerous other metaphors that have been used to capture the zone of play or the border that surrounds it, such as world, frame, bubble, net, screen, reality, membrane, zone, environment, or attitude. The various conceptions of social and mental borders are reviewed and separated from the sites where cultural residue of such borders is encountered. Finally, a model is forwarded where the psychological bubble of playfulness, the social contract of the magic circle and the spatial, temporal or product-based arena are separated.

Keywords

magic circle, psychological bubble, arena, play, game, boundary of play, safety

INTRODUCTION

Magic circle continues to be a hotly debated term in game studies. The term is intuitively accepted, useful in describing the difference between play and non-play; a handy metaphor that acts as intellectual shorthand for a more complex set of social relations. Yet when taken too literally, it can cloud our understanding of how play is bounded.

The metaphor of magic circle stands for a border between play and non-play. However, it is only one of many formulations of a border that surrounds and envelopes play, a border that has numerous ethical, legal and practical implications, a border that functions as a design aid, and a border that is relevant for an understanding of what play is. In order to come up with useful theoretical tools, the personal mindset of the participant and the socially negotiated and upheld contract that yields a site of play need to be separated. Though these psychological and sociological objects are interwoven, it makes sense to separate them for analytical rigour (e.g. Montola et.al., 2009, 257-278; Stenros, 2010). The psychological border set up by adopting a playful mindset and the border set up socially through negotiation often coincide, but they are two different things. In addition, as a residue these two create sites that are culturally recognized as arenas of play – even when they are empty and unused. Confusing the three (mindset, social border, and site) leads to muddled conceptions of play, games, and playing.

In the following I shall review the history of the magic circle and its criticism, explore different formulations of the social and psychological borders of play and, finally, formulate a synthesis view of the boundedness of play.

THE TWO MAGIC CIRCLES

The idea of the magic circle is that as playing begins, a special space is created. What happens within is interpreted playfully and has no direct effect on the everyday world. The concept is traced back to Huizinga (1938), who wrote:

> All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (Huizinga, 1938, 10)

Huizinga did not consider the temporary world dedicated to the act apart purely as a physical space, but something that could be marked ideally. Also, though the concept of the magic circle is usually attributed to Huizinga, and the above passage does capture the idea behind how the concept is used even today, he did not dwell on the subject for too long. Indeed, the term magic circle only appears six times in (the English translation of) *Homo Ludens*, and only three times in the chapter game scholars usually refer to: in the passage quoted above, once in the metaphoric meaning it has since acquired in game studies (11) and once as an example of a sacred space (as opposed to playful space, 20). However, in the context of the whole book it is not just an example or a metaphor among many, but a core feature of the examples given (as pointed out by Calleja, forthcoming, see Huizinga, 1938, 77, 210, 212).[1]

In the book *Rules of Play*, Salen and Zimmerman (2004, 93-99) developed and defined the concept of the magic circle as it is understood in game studies today. Though the term and the central idea are adapted from Huizinga, the works of Apter (1991) and Sniderman (1999) also contributed to the framing. Zimmerman (2012) later clarified his view of the evolution of the term:

> To be perfectly honest, Katie [Salen] and I more or less invented the concept, inheriting its use from my work with Frank [Lantz in the 1990s], cobbling together ideas from Huizinga and Caillois [1958], clarifying key elements that were important for our book, and reframing it in terms of semiotics and design – two disciplines that certainly lie outside the realm of Huizinga's own scholarly work. (Zimmerman, 2012)

This is important, as there are critics who question Salen & Zimmerman based on what Huizinga wrote, and vice versa (e.g. Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2008, 24-25). The two terms are connected, but the formulations – and especially the ontological contexts of the formulations – are different. Salen & Zimmerman's (2004) *magic circle of gameplay* is entered voluntary, is self-sufficient, set apart from ordinary life in locality and duration, and it has rules that differ from ordinary life. For them the possible development of play from culture is not relevant. They describe the magic circle as shorthand for "the idea of a special place in time and space created by a game," (95) and go on to explain why they feel that it is a fitting metaphor; the circle is both finite and infinite, while the magic is in the transformation of meaning within the circle. In their formulation, the boundaries of play are fuzzy and permeable (94), but the borders of games are more formal (95). The magic circle is entered as play begins, or it is generated with that initiation (95). While within the magic circle, a temporary world is created where meaning is handled

differently and rules of the game have authority (96). While in the circle, the players adopt a *lusory attitude* (97; see Suits, 1978). The temporary world of the game is an open system and a closed system depending on whether games are framed as rules (closed system), play (open or closed) or culture (open) (96-97). They also provide examples of the blurring of the boundaries from larp and what later would be called pervasive games, when actions are indexical or the activity is not formally recognized as play (574-579).

CRITICISM OF THE MAGIC CIRCLE

This conceptualization of magic circle has faced strong criticism, mostly because many scholars feel that the division between play and ordinary life is ultimately invalid. T.L. Taylor (2006, 151-155), writing in her book *Play between Worlds* about exploring online game cultures, questions whether or not the division between game and life needs to be as strong as her reading of Salen & Zimmerman makes it out to be (see also Castronova, 2005, 147-160). She sees the discussion about the division between game and life mirroring the discussion about the separateness of online and offline, and calls for non-dichotomous models. Her criticism is irrelevant if virtual worlds are not considered games but spaces where play happens, but even as she points this limitation out, she wonders whether or not this is actually a problem with the definition of games.

Thomas Malaby (2007) is on the same track, but words his criticism much more harshly. He questions that a clear division between play and ordinary everyday life exists at all. He also does not target just the magic circle, but play itself as long as it is understood as *separate* from ordinary life, *safe* and free of consequences, and *pleasurable*. This criticism is based on the work of virtual world ethnographers like Taylor and his own ethnography in Greece amongst *backgammon* gamblers. "[A]ny game can have important consequences not only materially but also socially and culturally," he writes (107), and continues that this finding was very relevant also in non-gambling contexts when status and relationships are on the table in place of money. However, Malaby does consider games "relatively separate", pointing out that the degree of separation is highly dependant on cultural context. He underlines (111) that games are socially constructed to be "separable to some degree from everyday experience."

Malaby's criticism is also reminiscent of what Marinka Copier (2005) wrote a few years earlier, when she drew attention to magic circle as a metaphor; Huizinga's circle was a sacred space whereas Salen & Zimmerman use a picture of a chalk circle to recontextualize the metaphor as child's play:

> The visualization and metaphorical way of speaking of the magic circle as a chalk, or even, rusty circle is misleading. It suggests we can easily separate play and non-play, in which the play space becomes a magical wonderland. However, I argue that the space of play is not a given space but is being constructed in negotiation between player(s) and the producer(s) of the game but also among players themselves. (Copier, 2005, 8)

Sybille Lammes (2006) has also criticised the magic circle metaphor; she sees it as a simplification of the relationship between the game and the world. Propelled by Bruno Latour's work on actor-network theory she has proposed moving to the term *magic node*. Jesper Juul (2008) has advocated the term *puzzle piece* to underline how games interface with the world around them, and Edward Castronova (2005, 147) has proposed that *membrane* would be a better term for the barrier that separates synthetic (i.e. online) worlds from the Earth.

Others who have voiced this kind of criticism include Mia Consalvo (2009, 411), who has argued that the magic circle upholds a structuralist conceptualization of games and that it emphasizes form at the cost of function. Especially the context of play is lost, and often context is key in deepening the understanding of instances of play.

Much of the criticism of Salen & Zimmerman's magic circle seems to stem from their ill-worded explanation behind the choice of the term (2004, 95): "The fact that the magic circle is just that – a circle – is an important feature of this concept. As a closed circle, the space it circumscribes is enclosed and separate from the real world." The usage of the words *enclosed* and *separate* here seems unfortunate, as their larger description of the concept is hardly that closed. It is almost as if this passage has turned the concept of magic circle into a straw man. For example, Malaby's demand that the nature of games as socially constructed is not really in conflict with what Salen & Zimmerman wrote.

It is hard to find a scholar who has insisted on a strict border between play and non-play. Perhaps the most severe proponent of a clear division was Roger Caillois. He devoted a whole chapter in *Man, Play and Games* (1958, 43-55) to describing the corruption of games: if play ceases to be free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, regulated or fictive, he no longer sees it as play. A player who cannot properly stay aloof and separate play from non-play is corrupted. Upholding this *normative* border was extremely important to Caillois: cheaters and professionals destroy play, and in general the corruption of play leads, he felt, to alienation, superstition, violence, alcoholism and drugs! Yet even Caillois does not claim that there *is* a strict division between play and non-play, on the contrary; he claims that there *should* be a division.

Daniel Pargman and Peter Jakobsson (2008) also attack the "strong-boundary hypothesis" of Salen & Zimmerman's magic circle, based on interviews and observations of hard core digital gamers in their homes. Their findings make it difficult to conceive of a clear, closed-off border between play and everyday life. Their separationist reading of Salen & Zimmerman's model is unfair, yet their criticism hits home when it moves from the 'circle' part to the 'magic' part. Their interviewees rarely experience any kind of magic or enchantment when playing digital games. Quite the opposite; it is common to play and watch television, or to play for a short time while waiting for the pasta to cook. Though Salen & Zimmerman mostly conceive of the 'magic' to refer to the transformation of meaning within play, the connection to sacred is very much present in Huizinga's original work. Thus it is more a criticism of the idealization of play than of the magic circle as a separate semiotic domain. Based on Pargman and Jakobsson's work it seems clear that there are many instances of digital game playing that are better characterized as mundane than as magical.

Michael Liebe (2008) and Gordon Calleja doubt the existence of magic circle specifically in *digital* games, since "the majority of actions possible are programmed into the game system and cannot be changed" (Calleja, forthcoming). There are three problems with this criticism: first, the interpretation of magic circle is quite narrow. For Liebe and Calleja only the agreement on constitutive rules (what is possible) is relevant, leaving out interpretation of rules, extra-ludic motivations or consequences, player-created goals, et cetera. Secondly, the difference to traditional games is not as severe as presented here. There are numerous "rules" in sports that an athlete cannot ignore (like the weight of the equipment, law of gravity) (see Montola, forthcoming), and – as Calleja points out – digital games also have social rules. Thirdly, this view casts digital games in a narrow light: only the events displayed on a screen (or even just the events within a field depicted

on a screen) are within the magic circle (and thus the game). The player and the controller in front of the screen are not considered.

Zimmerman addresses some of these criticisms in a popular article (2012), attacking "magic circle jerks" who insists on an absolute separation between game and non-game does not exist. Zimmerman rejects the strong boundary hypothesis attributed to him and asserts that the core idea of a magic circle is that "games are a context from which meaning can emerge".[2] Indeed, Jesper Juul (2008, 59) has pointed out that many of the critics of the magic circle (he cites Copier, Malaby, Pargman & Jakobsson) "claim to counter Huizinga, Salen and Zimmerman by stressing the exact social nature of the magic circle that Huizinga, Salen and Zimmerman also stress." Zimmerman (2012) also claims that the concept he and Salen put forward was mainly meant as a tool for design, and thus it should be evaluated based on its utility.

Despite the criticism, magic circle continues to be used. It seems to be a useful, powerful metaphor, though it has not been exactly clear what it is a metaphor *for*. Some of the problems seem to be connected to the idea of games as pre-existing artefacts that players enter into, others to the concept of the magic circle as necessarily material. A particularly lucid new formulation for magic circle has been offered by Markus Montola, who conceives of

> the magic circle as a metaphor and a ritualistic contract. The function of the isolating contractual barrier is to forbid the players from bringing external motivations and personal histories into the world of game and to forbid taking game events into the realm of ordinary life. While all human activities are equally real, the events taking place within the contract are given special social meanings. (Montola et al., 2009, 11)

This formulation takes a further step away from addressing the relation between play and culture and instead underlines the social nature of the play contract. Conceptions of such a social barrier between play and non-play are quite common, and numerous interesting formulations have been proposed without the term magic circle attached. We shall next review some of these formulations of social boundaries.

SOCIAL BORDERS

The boundedness of play has been postulated not just in game studies, but also at least in philosophy, sociology, psychology, performance studies, library and information studies and legal studies. Metaphors that have been used to encapsulate play or the border around it include world, frame, bubble, screen, membrane, reality, zone, environment and net.

Philosopher Kurt Riezler (1941) makes two distinctions: a social division between ordinary life and what he calls *playworld*, and a mental division between serious and playful attitudes.[3] Playful and serious are opposites in his thinking, and there is a clear separation: "Though man's mood can move things to and fro over the borderline between play and seriousness, he can not move the borderline itself, which demarcates attitudes, not things." Riezler sees this playworld as a separate from the ordinary, something you enter voluntarily:

> An area of playing is isolated by our sovereign whim or by man-made agreement. Things within this area mean what we order them to mean. They are cut off from their meanings in the so-called real world or ordinary life. No chains of causes and effects, means and ends, are supposed to connect the isolated area of play with the real world or ordinary life. If there still are such chains they are disregarded. (Riezler, 1941, 511)

In the real world everything is connected in chains of cause and effect, but in the playworld the chains of causes and effects have limits. However, the game can have goals that are connected to the real world, as in gambling or professional sports. Note especially that Riezler also considers the playworld to be a social construct, a "man-made agreement." He introduces the playworld with these words:

> I begin with the most simple case. We play games such as chess or bridge. They have rules the players agree to observe. These rules are not the rules of the "real" world or of "ordinary" life. Chess has its king and queen, knights and pawns, its space, its geometry, its laws of motion, its demands, and its goal. The queen is not a real queen, nor is she a piece of wood or ivory. She is an entity in the game defined by the movements the game allows her. The game is the context within which the queen is what she is. This context is not the context of the real world or of ordinary life. The game is a little cosmos of its own. (Riezler, 1941, 505)

This is the exact quote that Erving Goffman (1961, 27) cites before summing it up with the oft-quoted line: "Games, then, are world-building activities." But before discussing Goffman in detail, let us consider Gregory Bateson's conception of *frame*.

In the same essay where Bateson (1955) discusses metacommunication and the signal "this is play," he also introduces psychological frames. These frames delimit what are meaningful actions and as such they are metacommunications. Bateson discussed the frames as psychological, but he also considers how they work in communication as messages – basically saying that they are also social. Though Bateson's formulation of frame is ultimately a little unclear – perhaps due to its function as a tool in psychotherapy – it has been hugely influential. The idea that there could be a metacommunicative frame that declares "this is play" has been picked up by numerous scholars.

For example, in their discussion of the idealization of play, Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne (1984, 317-318) come to the conclusion that one of the few things that can be said about play is that it is always a Batesonian framed event. They go on to point out that it is essential for the participants to keep in mind that they are playing, "otherwise the activity will break down into anxiety or violence as indeed it often does." They also list numerous cues that can be used in keeping the playfulness of the frame at the forefront of everyone's minds: certain types of actions (e.g. exaggeration, repetition), objects, physical scenes, vocalizations (e.g. registers for iconic sounds for cars or babies), characters, and attitudes.

The most well-known extrapolation of Bateson's frame comes from Goffman (1961, 20): "games place a 'frame' around a spate of immediate events, determining the type of 'sense' that will be accorded everything within the frame." Frame is thus social, shared and provides meaning in an *encounter*, a social situation (whereas Bateson's frames are more akin to mental representations).[4] An example of how sense is made in a game context is provided by *the rules of irrelevance*: during gaming, the participants forswear interest in the value of the game equipment. For example a chess set can be made of cardboard, wood or gold, yet during the game it is treated in the same way. Similarly the players' background or social status should not influence the playing of the game (19-26). However, certain characteristics of the player do influence the game (29-31) (couples do

not play bridge together, age might determine the order of turns, social status might be translated to a 'better' character in an RPG). This incorporation of external elements is guided by what Goffman (33) calls *transformation rules*: these rules tell us what modifications take place as external patterns of properties, which are given expression within the game.

Where the rules of irrelevance tell what is left out of the game frame, Goffman uses the Riezler quote to tease out what is kept in the frame. Games are world-building activities, as they set an "engine of meaning", which makes it possible for events, roles and identities to emerge that would not be understandable or meaningful in any other frame (like grounding out to third, atari or half-elf warrior). However, since Goffman's interests do not just lie in games, he uses them as a stepping stone to say something about the social world. Unlike Riezler, who conceived of an ordinary life outside playworlds, Goffman sees everyday life as similar to games: only in the context of the street do terms like pedestrian or motorist become meaningful (26-29). More generally he discussed encounters or focused social gatherings, using games as prism to show these properties.

> Games seem to display in a simple way the structure of real-life situations. They cut us off from serious life by immersing us in a demonstration of its possibilities. We return to the world as gamesmen, prepared to see what is structural about reality and ready to reduce life to its liveliest elements. (Goffman, 1961, 34)

Games are a tool for Goffman. They enable us to look at the everyday in a different way, to strip away the unnecessary. However, it also shows that Goffman sees games and real-life situations as different, though connected. Goffman (65-66) introduces the metaphor of an *interaction membrane* as the boundary around an encounter. The border around play is permeable; as the wider world passes though more than just application of the transformation rules takes place. Yes, some elements are ignored and repressed, others are transformed, but it is also possible for the external elements to endanger the transformation rules and thus the encounter itself. It is possible for play to be collapsed by external events.

In *The Magic Circle: Principles of Gaming & Simulation* Jan H. G. Klabbers takes this idea further. He argues that games have a dual nature as social systems (2006, 38-46). This opens up a whole library of theory from social sciences, which is ignored in this article.

> [*G*]*ames are social systems*, and moreover they represent social systems – real or imagined. They are also *models of social systems*. It is crucial to keep that dual position in mind. Even if a game involves one actor, that actor will always enter the magic circle with a social system, real or imagined, in mind. A player does not enter social vacuum. (Klabbers, 2006, 81-82, emphases in original)

Though Klabbers' conception of the magic circle is mostly based on Huizinga's formulation, he uses it more in the context of formal games and simulations than spontaneous play. This would explain why it seems that in this passage he conflates the magic circle as a social contract and the game as a formalized artifact of a social contract.

Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann have tackled the delimiting of play from non-play in their foundational text *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). They postulate a paramount ultimate reality that can enclose "other realities" which are "finite provinces of meaning" (also Schutz, 1945, 551-560; James, 1890):

> Compared to the reality of everyday life, other realities appear as finite provinces of meaning, enclaves within the paramount reality marked by circumscribed meanings and modes of experience. The paramount reality envelopes them on all sides, as it were, and consciousness always returns to the paramount reality as from excursion. This is evident from the illustration already given, as in the reality of dreams or that of theoretical thought. Similar "commutations" take place between the world of everyday life and the world of play, both the playing of children and, even more sharply, of adults. The theatre provides an excellent illustration of such playing on the part of adults. The transition between realities is marked by the rising and falling of the curtain. As the curtain rises, the spectator is "transported to another world" with its own meanings and an order that may or may not have much to do with the order of everyday life. As the curtain falls, the spectator "returns to reality," that is, to the paramount reality of everyday life by comparison with which the reality presented on stage now appears tenuous and ephemeral, however vivid the presentation may have been a few moments previously. Aesthetic and religious experience is rich in producing transitions of this kind, inasmuch as art and religion are endemic producers of finite provinces of meaning. (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, 25)

Berger and Luckmann, like Riezler, Bateson and Goffman, postulate a structure constituted by *meaning* Noteworthy here is that these other realities are commuted to and from, and that Berger and Luckman also challenge the exceptionalism of games; play and games are by no means the only finite provinces of meaning of this type, art, theatre, religion and even dreams offer similar enclaves.

Goffman further developed the theory on encounters; his 1974 book *Frame Analysis - An Essay on the Organization of Experience* again begins by discussing Bateson's frames, and their application of it to games (7, 40-43). However, he discards most of the terms he introduced in *Fun in Games*, like encounter and membrane, and instead introduces terms such as framing and keying.

Instead of everyday life Goffman discusses primary frame, which is the basis for our interpretation (21-39). Things that we say 'really' or 'actually' occur, occur in the primary frame (47); this activity is meaningful in its own right (560). The primary frame is itself also a construct, as culture, religion and cosmology influences it for social groups (27) – and Goffman makes a distinction between natural and social primary frameworks (21-22).[5] The primary framework is not enough to make sense of what is going on; a transformation of meaning takes place.

> [T]he set of conventions by which given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else. (Goffman, 1974, 43-44)

This is referred to as *keying*, and examples include make-believe, contests, ceremonials, technical redoings, or copies (48-78). Once an activity has been keyed, it can be further

transformed by rekeying. Furthermore, keying is not the only way that activity can be transformed. The other possibility is though *fabrication*, which Goffman defines (83) as "the intentional effort of one or more individuals to manage activity so that a party of one or more others will be induced to have a false belief about what is going on."[6]

Through keying, rekeying and fabrication it is possible to establish frames within frames. Frames organize not only meaning, but also involvement (345). For example, it is possible to become engrossed in the activity of a game so much that one forgets that it is supposed to be play (*downkeying*, a mock fight becomes real), or to move further away from the primary framework and forget the meaning of the play equipment (*upkeying*, money losing meaning in gambling) (359-368).

During play numerous frames are present, and the participant has multiple roles he adopts. In *Fun in Games* Goffman (1961) uses the example of a bowler who takes a bad shot, and when he turns back to face his fellow players, he makes a facial expression that signals that the shot was not representative of his skills (51). An ideal player would not need to send such a signal, but the human participant does so. It is not part of the system of the game, but of the social encounter around it. Indeed, good sportsmanship is not about playing the game, but about navigating the social frame around it.

Though Goffman certainly does see play as taking place in a frame, the boundaries are far from clear. Frames within frames mean that there is a frame for the administration of a spectacle (such as rituals around a game) and then a frame for the game proper (261-265; see also Fine, 1983, 181-204). For example, he considers that all discussions about the rim of the frame between play and non-play lead to paradox; discussing the edge of the frame takes place in the framework (249).

The conceptualizations of delimited spaces within everyday life capable of transforming social reality are abundant. For example in the realm of psychodrama, Jacob L. Moreno (1965) has proposed the concept of *surplus reality*, based on Marx's conception of surplus value. Surplus reality is a kind of alternative reality, a shared social space, where a group can act out or rehearse painful situations or relations from a participant's life. Andrew Letcher (2001) has added the concept of *temporary tribal zones* into the pot. Writing in the context of religious studies, Letcher makes observations about a temporary spatial arrangement. Building on Mikhail Bakhtin's (1965) *carnivalesque* and Hakim Bey's (1985) *temporary autonomous zones*, Letcher proposes a temporary transformed space through the rules and conventions of a neo-tribe. The transformation is so strong that it creates an illusion of autonomy, though does not actually achieve it.

J. Tuomas Harviainen and Andreas Lieberoth (2011) have compared rituals and games in the context of library and information sciences.[7] They build on the works of Huizinga, Letcher and Bateson, and discuss a *local information environment*, which both of these cultural forms share. It determines what parts of the real world are allowed to affect the participant's behaviour. According to them, the separation of the real world and the game/ritual is made possible, from an informational angle, by three key features: "resignification of elements within the situation, increased attention to shared intentionality, and the fact that during such activities, access to information outside of the activity is limited."

The resignification is very similar to Goffman's rules of transformation. However, notice that for Harviainen and Lieberoth (as well as for Riezler and Bateson) the border between

play and non-play is not just social, but has also a strong psychological element in attention to shared intentionality. Next I shall move on to considering the border as personal and mental instead of social.

MENTAL BORDER

Similar to the sociologists cited above, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975) does not see games as exceptional. Playfulness (a mindset), or *flow*, can take place not just in play and games (social setting), but also in work. However, it is interesting to note that Csikszentmihalyi's characteristics of flow are not dissimilar to those of the magic circle; in fact one of them, *centering of attention on limited stimulus field*, seems familiar in this context (80-82).[8] In Csikszentmihalyi's discussion of the experience of rock climbers, he writes that in contrast to

> normative everyday life, the action of rock climbing is narrow, simplified and internally coherent. […] The physical and mental requirements involved in staying on the rock act as a screen for the stimuli of ordinary life – a screen maintained by the intense and focused concentration. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 81)

Csikszentmihalyi also discussed the limitation of the stimulus field in relation to doctors performing surgery, and points out (131) how it is important for the surgeon "to adopt a neutral attitude toward the future of the patient's life." The playful activity, flow, is delimited from the experience of the normative everyday life.

In constructing a structural-phenomenology of play, Michael J. Apter (1991) also talks about a border. He sees it as a *psychological bubble* and terms it *protective frame*.[9] The paratelic state is characterized by freedom and it being voluntary: there is a feeling of being able to turn off the television, to be able to walk out of the game, or packing away gardening tools.

> In play, we seem to create a small and manageable private world which we may, of course, share with others; and this world is one in which, temporarily at least, nothing outside has any significance, and into which the outside world of real problems cannot properly impinge. If the 'real world' does enter in some way, it is transformed and sterilised in the process so that it is no longer truly itself, and can do no harm. (Apter, 1991, 14)

There is a private world, but it is not cut off from the real world. Like Goffman's interaction membrane, when properties from non-play world enter, they are transformed. Another important feature is that when a person is in a paratelic mindset, when she is within this psychological bubble, she feels secure and unthreatened:

> [I]n the play-state you experience a protective frame which stands between you and the 'real' world and its problems, creating an enchanted zone in which, in the end, you are confident that no harm can come. Although this frame is psychological, interestingly it often has a perceptible physical representation: the proscenium arch of the theatre, the railings around the park, the boundary line on the cricket pitch, and so on. But such a frame may also be abstract, such as the rules governing the game being played. In the end, whether one is experiencing what one is doing as being within a protective frame or not, is a matter of one's own phenomenology. (Apter, 1991, 15)

The major difference, then, between the psychological formulations, and the social formulations, is that in the former the border and its construction are conceived of mainly

as phenomenological and personal. This helps in explaining why different people have differing interpretations of playful situations – or even as to what counts as playful – as the protective psychological bubble is not uniform and shared, but personal. Considering these in relation to danger is especially illuminating: it does not matter if a situation is objectively speaking dangerous or not, the personal experience and perception of it (and the person experiencing and perceiving) is what influences the presence or absence of the bubble. This helps in explaining and understanding deep play and dark play (Schechner, 1988, 12-14; Geertz, 1973, 432-433; Sutton-Smith & Kelly-Byrne, 1984, 314-316, Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 74-101).

Compare this to Bernard Suits' (1978) concept of *lusory attitude*. He sees it as one of the building blocks of games, even a requirement for the constitution of a game. A player with a lusory attitude accepts the rules of the game just because they make possible such activity as the game (41). Suits' formulation is interesting as he marries the social and the personal: games require rules, which – though they can be personal – are usually socially shared. But in order for the game to be possible, all the participants must accept the rules. This is a personal choice. The player can have ulterior motives (like being near someone else who plays the game, making money as a player), but they still need to adapt an attitude where they take the rules seriously in order for the game to take place (142-146).

The attitude Suits discusses is not directly comparable to Apter's bubble or Csikszentmihalyi's screen; it seems more like something that can help in achieving that phenomenological state. It is an attitude one can choose to have, not something one strives for. Yet it does underline how the player is knowingly fostering a playful approach, even if she may not be able to switch from a telic to a paratelic or autotelic mindset on a whim. Humans not only play, but they are aware that they play. Suits also notes:

> It is true, of course, that some things do change with a change of attitude. If playing – rather than playing games – is activity which is always and only undertaken for its own sake, then 'professional player' is a contradiction in terms. On such a view we would be obliged to say that a professional athlete was not *playing*, but we would not be obliged to deny that he was playing a *game*. (Suits, 1978, 144)

The borders as postulated in psychology tend to be phenomenological and personal. These mental metaphors – though they describe a border around play – are ultimately different from the social construct of the magic circle. Like between play and game, there is a connection between the psychological bubble and the magic circle, and that connection is not as clear as one might hope.

SAFETY AND THE BORDERS OF PLAY

The border that surrounds play is most visible when it is questioned, threatened or played with. Transgressive play draws attention to the border – and even questions if any border exists. Yet without limits, it is impossible to push oneself past them. According to Juul (2008, 64) "the magic circle is best understood as *the boundary that players negotiate*."
Bad, dangerous, transgressive and harmful play seemingly challenges the idea of play as separate. Especially gambling has been used as proof that play is inseparable from everyday life and that play can have grievous repercussions for ordinary life. However, psychologists have no problem incorporating "bad play" within a framework of separate

play. Performance scholar Richard Schechner has some ideas about that as well. For him the idea that play is dangerous is absolutely central:

> A coherent theory of play would assert that play and ritual are complementary, ethologically based behaviours which in humans continue undiminished throughout life; play creates its own (permeable) boundaries and realms; multiple realities that are slippery, porous, and full of creative lying and deceit; that play is dangerous and, because it is, players need to feel secure in order to begin playing; that the perils of playing are often masked or disguised by saying that play is fun, voluntary, a leisure activity, or ephemeral – when in fact the fun of playing, when there is fun, is in playing with fire, going in over one's head, inverting accepted procedures and hierarchies; that play is performative involving players, directors, spectators, and commentators in a quadralogical exchange that, because each kind of participant often has her or his own passionately pursued goal, is frequently at cross-purpose. (Schechner, 1988, 5)

Schechner also recognizes that play sets itself apart in its own realm, behind a porous border – and he discussed both the mental and the social aspects of it. Later in the same article he describes playing as a creative destabilizing action that neither declares its existence nor intention:

> I do not reject Bateson's play frame entirely – there are situations where the message "this is play" is very important. But there are other kinds of playing, like dark play, wherein the play-frame is absent, broken, porous or twisted. […] [T]he Batesonian play frame is a rationalist attempt to stabilize and localize playing, to contain it safely within definable borders. But if one needs a metaphor to localize and (temporarily) stabilize playing, "frame" is the wrong one – it's too stiff, too impermeable, too "on/off," "inside/outside." "Net" is better: a porous, flexible, gatherer: a three-dimensional, dynamic flow-through container. (Schechner, 1988, 16)

As an example of play that is not socially shared, metacommunicated, he points out dark play. He even goes so far as to suggest that the person engaging in dark play may not even be sure that she is playing; it is possible that the action becomes (dark) play in hindsight, in the retelling, reframing and narrativization of the event (Schechner, 1988, 14; see also Denzin, 1982, 13-14).

However, Schechner also points out that the players need to feel secure in order to begin play (also, Weisler & McCall, 1976). Trust is a key element. Indeed, the idea that play and games are safe is deeply ingrained in the discourse of game studies and especially game design. It ties into the idea that play is separate from everyday life and actions taken during play bear few consequences beyond the play session (see e.g. Caillois, 1958; also Rodriguez, 2006). The typical way of framing that is by saying that games are a safe platform to practise. Game designer Chris Crawford has expressed this argument nicely:

> Therefore, a game is an artifice for providing the psychological experiences of conflict and danger while excluding their physical realizations. In short, a game is a safe way to experience reality. More accurately, the results of a game are always less harsh than the situations the game models. (Crawford, 1982, 12)

Similarly a fellow designer Bernie DeKoven (2002, 12-13) considers trust among players and a feeling of safety (not risking more than we are willing to risk) as integral elements in establishing the intention of playing well together. This general argument has also received specific formulations. For example, in regards to role-playing games Toni Sihvonen has written about what he calls the role-playing contract:

> After the player makes a decision regarding the discontinuation of self in the beginning of immersion, it is no longer justified to draw conclusions on the player from the actions of the character. It is difficult to fully establish the role-playing contract – familiar faces and memorable characters leave their mark on players. The core of the contract is in trust. When a player trusts the contract, he dares to immerse even in activities the player would consider awkward or strange. (Sihvonen, 1997, 7, translated from Finnish)

Basically the contract states that the participants should not make judgements about the player based on the character, or vice versa. There is a disconnect between the player and the character. Though people do make such assumptions, the social contract makes it possible for role-players to take on roles that are very dissimilar from themselves (c.f. Goffman, 1974, 194-195, 275-284). What is interesting about Sihvonen's formulation is that it explicates the contractual nature of the border that is drawn between play and non-play; Crawford takes that contract as given.

What all these formulations have in common is, again, the idea that trust is built socially. Malaby (2007, 110) has called games *artifactual* to underline that they are not only manmade, but specifically socially constructed to be separate (to a varying degree) from everyday life.

It is also interesting to note that there are numerous games that take advantage of playing around with the borders of play. Either the borders are blurred and expanded, as in pervasive games (Montola et al., 2009), or the playing happens knowingly on the border, as what Cindy Poremba (2007) calls *brink play*. Though the metaphors are different, the phenomenon is the same: both use, as Poremba puts it, "the contested space at the boundary of games and life". For many players the central draw of pervasive games is that they create an ambiguous zone between play and non-play – and inhabiting this not-knowing is quite pleasurable for some players (Montola et al., 2009; McGonigal, 2006).

According to Poremba, (2007) brink games[10] knowingly play with the metacommunicative statement "this is play". Players who engage in brink play[11] will be able to do things that in the normal social frame would not be acceptable, but are acceptable as they are "just playing" – but at the same time the possibility to be able to do those transgressive things for real is the reason they want to play. A game qualifies as brink play if a conflict between implicit social rules and implicit (or even explicit) game rules is integral to the playing (see also Consalvo, 2005, 10).

Of course, it is also possible to use games to generate danger that spills outside its borders. Some sorts of dark and deep play do not so much use games as an alibi, but as an engine of strong emotional experiences. *Bleed* play (Montola, 2010), where role-playing games are played in order for the player to experience some kind of shock, is an example of this.

The ambiguity produced by pervasive games and the winking at metacommunication in brink play presupposes a difference between play and non-play, or at least a friction between different frames, or different sets of social rules. The rhetorics surrounding bleed play do this as well, though perhaps the social contract around such play is a little different to begin with.

Another interesting thing to note about the borders of play is that they are often recognized by legal systems. As Greg Lastowka (2009), a scholar of law, has pointed out, violence is legally accepted in a boxing ring[12], and subjecting oneself to an unreasonable

risk of harm is inherent to American football (386). Building on Huizinga, Lastowka notes that games are not just separate from the everyday, but they are ordered separate spheres that have their own jurisdictions and special rules; courts, for example, do not review the rulings of game referees (though they do uphold contract law) (385, 390-391). Games are not the only social sphere where there are special rules (compare dormitories, religious communities), but games can have rules that are in stark contrast with the state rules – though often deep play is legislated as in boxing, gambling and bungee jumping (388-389).

The fact that many state legal systems recognize games as happening in a different jurisdiction, of course, says very little about the border around play. Legal systems are social constructs just as games are and there is no reason why one construct would not recognize another. However, what it does show is that on a cultural level that border is – at least up to a point – recognized and respected. Interestingly, Lastowka's main argument addresses the legality of real-money trade in virtual worlds: he believes virtual worlds are games and thus courts should not interfere in the upkeep of the rules in these separate spheres of jurisdiction (392-394). If virtual worlds are games, then that assessment makes sense. But, again, if they are sites where play takes place, but where also non-play happens, than the situation is more complex. Yet Reynolds and de Zwart (2010) have found that the end user licence agreements of MMOGs have explicit contractual statements that require the user to only use them for 'play', whatever a legal duty to play might mean...

CONCLUSIONS

It is possible to conceive of three different boundaries of play: the 'protective frame' that surrounds a person in a playful state of mind (psychological bubble), the social contract that constitutes the action of playing (a game) (magic circle), and the spatial or temporal cultural site where (or a product around which) play is expected to happen (arena).

The *psychological bubble* is personal, a phenomenological experience of safety in a playful (paratelic/autotelic) state of mind. If a person plays alone, she need not negotiate or metacommunicate with others (though usually she does signal play unconsciously). There is a 'border' around her experience, a frame that guides her interpretation of the situation. A player needs to feel safe in order to be playful, though it is not necessary to actually be safe.

The *magic circle* is the social contract that is created through implicit or explicit social negotiation and metacommunication in the act of playing (a game). This social contract can become societal as other social frameworks (law, economics) can recognize it. It is created when there is more then one person engaged in playful activity, though once established it is no longer necessary for everyone to constantly remain in a playful mindset. There is a connection between a playful mindset and play, but as a result of social negotiation and shared structuring of an encounter, it is possible to be in a telic mindset and still remain within the socially agreed borders. This applies to the playing of single player games as well: though they can be played alone, they are socially recognized as domains of special meaning, as games. However, if enough participants slip into a telic mindset, then it can be questioned whether what is contained within the borders remains play even if it is still a game.

The *arena* of play is a temporal or spatial site that is culturally recognized as a structure for playful action, or an inert ludic product. As the social negotiation of a magic circle becomes culturally established and the border physically represented, arenas emerge as

residue of the playing (the tennis court, April Fool's Day, game products). These sites are recognized as structures that foster play even when empty (and they can be constructed in ways that seek to foster playfulness), but require use to be activated as the border of the magic circle remains social. As socially recognized they have severed the need to be engaged in with a playful mindset.

The players are rarely completely absorbed by the playing, which makes (meta)communication about play possible. It is possible to change the social contract during play – unless such changes are forbidden in by the initial social contract (as in institutionalized games). Furthermore, the contract can be played with, which heightens its existence and its nature as a social construct.

The participants are supposed to treat the encounter within the borders of the social contract as disconnected from the external world and they are not supposed to bring external motivations or other carryovers from the non-play to the play, yet sometimes they do. This can also be negotiated, or players can ignore it and pretend that they do not notice. As a contractual barrier is established, the events within the border are loaded with special significance. However, the border is porous and allows for traffic in and out, though passing through the border results in a re-signifying transformation – but it is also possible for the barrier to collapse due to pressure from the inside or out.

The events that take place while the contract is in effect are real, though their meanings may be altered. As the encounter is set up through social negotiation and special signification, it is possible to have numerous overlapping social contracts and frames of signification. The participant is able to view and interpret the events that take place through these various frames. Though this formulation is written with play and games in mind, it may be useful for deciphering other social encounters as well.

ENDNOTES
1 Huizinga's critics have mounted a convincing case that his conceptions of play and seriousness as well as play and everyday life are muddled, for examples: Ehrmann (1968, 32-33) questions the lack of definition for "reality" or "everyday life", and how it is possible that reality exists prior to its component, play. Anchor (1978, 87) questions how Huizinga maintains both that play does not exclude seriousness, and that play and seriousness are two separate categories. Calleja (forthcoming) points out that "[r]eality does not contain play; like any other socio-culture construction, play is an intractable manifestation of reality." See also Rodriguez (2006) and Lammes (2006). This article, however, concentrates on the formulation of the magic circle forwarded by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004) and thus sidesteps these ontological criticisms.

2 Montola (forthcoming) has noted that the contexts discussed by Salen & Zimmerman are what Searle (1995) discusses as contexts if his formulation "X is Y in C".

3 Note that Riezler (1941, 508) writes about adult play. As he sees it, in child's play the real world and the play world have not yet separated.

4 Note that *Fun in Games* addresses "the kind of games that are played around a table" (Goffman, 1961, 8) as Goffman was mostly interested in face-to-face interaction. It is important to keep this delimitation in mind though many of the concepts introduced there are applicable in a wider context of gaming.

5 A more useful way of conceptualizing the construction of everyday life and primary frameworks is offered by John Searle (1995).

6 In Bateson's terms, the difference between keying and fabrication is that in keying the frame is correctly meta-communicated to all actors and in fabrication some of the actors are intentionally misled.

7 For a review and discussion on the magic circle as re-signifying and sorting information barrier, see Harviainen (forthcoming).

8 This has been discussed in psychology sometimes as "selective inattention".

9 Though conceptually Apter's protective frame is similar to and inspired by Bateson's and Goffman's frames (Kerr, 1991, 34), it is important to note that it is personal and not necessarily social. In order to avoid confusion I'll refer to Apter's protective frame with his own metaphor *psychological bubble*.

10 Salen & Zimmerman (2004, 478-481) discuss the same subjects under the header of *forbidden play*, but I prefer the term brink play.

11 Examples of brink play can be found in *spin the bottle*, *Twister*, *Pillow Time*, and the various kissing games (see Frasca, 2007, 160-177; Sutton-Smith, 1959).

12 For an account of the development of modern boxing from prizefighting, and the role of courts and legislation in that, see Anderson (2001).

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